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# WHAT HAPPENS IN SARGESON'S "THAT SUMMER"? A STUDY OF ROMANTIC "MATESHIP"

Joost Daalder

Frank Sargeson's "That Summer"<sup>1</sup> is, amongst his "short" stories, not only by far the longest in the genre in which amongst New Zealand writers he probably reigns supreme, but also an important literary work to study. The story — or short novel — has on the whole been well received, but hardly examined.<sup>2</sup> In particular, little attention has been paid to the significance of one of the narrator's last comments:

I lay there thinking back and trying to put two and two together. And I dozed off to sleep thinking unless you do it on paper, it's not always so easy to make two and two add up right. (238)

Whether "on paper" it *will* be easy to "make two and two add up right" remains to be seen, but it is so far certain, at any rate, that there has been no attempt made. One of the questions I shall try to answer, therefore, is: "In what way does Sargeson want us to put two and two together? What *happens* in 'That Summer'?" And by this I do not mean that there are not a great many events which we can see, but rather — as I think John Dover Wilson meant when applying the question to *Hamlet* — that we need to ask ourselves what happens that we do *not* see, both in terms of events and of significance.

Furthermore, I suggest that the answers are specially worth having, in this instance, not simply because of mere intellectual delight to be derived from the exercise, but partly to determine what, when he writes at his best, goes to explain Sargeson's particular appeal and importance for readers in Australasia and beyond; and partly to find out in conjunction with this what is to be meant by "mateship" — not necessarily mateship as it exists, but as, in Sargeson's Romantic vision, it should be.

There has been a lot of comment on the *locale* and period of the story; since I am not concerned with the things we can easily see, I shall limit myself to first of all confirming that "That Summer" is a story of a picaresque kind about a young man during the Depression in New Zealand (chiefly Auckland) who for much of the time is unemployed (partly through his own volition), who momentarily strikes up an acquaintance with all sorts of "waifs" and "strays," but who above all looks after his sick mate Terry until Terry's death in the seedy boarding house which has served as the chief place of accommodation for the two "cobbers."<sup>3</sup>

When Terry dies, though, something very odd happens which Winston Rhodes, for example, merely quotes, and which I believe someone like Bill Pearson, who does tackle the ending, understandably misinterprets.

Just before Terry's death, the narrator leaves him to "get the priest" (239) to which Terry's reaction appears to be "Cheers." Bill (the narrator) rushes off "without even saying goodbye":

I found the place and the priest said he'd come. So I waited and took him along and showed him Mrs Clegg's, and told him where to find the room upstairs. Then I went along the street and the taxi-driver I'd won the double with was on the stand.

Do you want to take one? he said.

No, I said, and I'd only got a few bob, but I asked him if he knew of any decent sheilas.

He grinned and put away the paper he was reading and told me to hop in.

You surprise me, he said.

And it was a fine warm night for a drive. Maybe if only it had rained, I remember I thought.

Thus ends "That Summer." It will be useful to quote what I take to be Pearson's reaction to this ending:

For the sake of loyalty to Terry he turns down another offer of mateship from a stranger in the park, a farm job in the country and an offer from a girl. Yet, at the end, when he has sent for the priest, he doesn't go back to Terry. Terry is left to die without his mate while Bill goes looking for a sheila. He plays it by ear and death is something he ducks away from. And the horrible thing is that all the experience of that summer will be no more to him than things that happened that summer: he will drift to another job, another mate perhaps, and he will have learnt little from it all that he didn't half-know already. (17)

Pearson observes, in his first sentence, Bill's undoubted allegiance throughout the story. But he evidently disapproves of Bill — and thinks that Sargeson does — in not going back to Terry. In this interpretation, Terry is treacherously abandoned by a "mate" who cannot face death, and who prefers to go "looking for a sheila." All that has happened during "that summer" ultimately has no significance for the shallow protagonist.

But, in that case, is it not a little strange that Terry seems to sanc-

tion Bill's departure by saying "Cheers"? "Cheers" is not the same as for example "See you," and since, moreover, Terry can at this stage hardly speak and obviously knows the end is near, it may be assumed that he, at least, sees his "Cheers" as some final greeting taking us back, cyclically, to the world of the pub and drinking-mates where Terry and Bill first met. The narrator's rushing off "without even saying goodbye" is presumably prompted by his anxiety to find the priest and do what he considers best for his mate. It does seem at first heartless that he does not accompany the priest to his mate's bedside; but there was another reason for the narrator's hurry; sometimes, during the long vigil, he "couldn't stand it" (239) and would "have to just rush off and leave him there." It seems likely that Terry, who is older than Bill and tolerant of human nature, can understand that it is difficult for him to watch the prolonged process of death by consumption. In the same vein, we may take a compassionate view of the narrator's interest in "decent sheilas"; he is trying to wipe out, one supposes, a painful experience by a healthy vitalistic drive. "Decent" is not merely an ironic word, according to this understanding, since it points in the direction of health away from Terry's sickness. And, at the very conclusion, "Maybe if only it had rained..." suggests that there is a deeper need for Bill to see "that summer" — and the whole experience that it represents — come to an end.

It is the reason for that deeper need, additional to all the support I have already marshalled for him, that I particularly want to probe, and my contention will be that we should take a much more positive view than Pearson of the narrator; that Winston Rhodes (79) has far too negative a view of him also, in suggesting that his "happiness is very largely a matter of physical well-being"; and that, on the contrary, Sargeson is presenting us with a highly idealized "mateship" in which both partners are not only loyal to each other but emotionally thrive on an essentially Platonic relationship. Sargeson's extraordinary success lies in defining mateship, however Romantically, as a loving relationship in which the purity of the feeling is the more intense, and the less spoiled, by being at once Platonic yet always carrying some latent (and natural, in his view) emotions normally reserved for what we consider to be typically "heterosexual" situations such as a maternal, or paternal instinct towards one's partner of the opposite sex. Once Bill becomes *aware* of sexual relations other than conventional heterosexual ones, this has grave implications for his Romantic adolescent love. This takes us to the point of having to add "two and two together," which I shall now proceed to do, as part of my attempt to discover Bill's deeper need to get away from Terry. And we shall see that while for sure Sargeson defines for us his view of what "mateship" properly is to consist of, his concern with, amongst other things, the mental versus the physical, makes him universally accessible and important. Indeed, I would claim that it is through the very presen-

tation of this issue as one involving two *men* that he gives us a fresh perspective on such matters as "Romantic love" versus "mere sex" — matters of perennial concern, anywhere.

Someone who, like myself, views himself or herself as utterly heterosexual (in whatever sense) is inclined at first to take Sargeson at face value when he presents us with what one supposes to be the woman Maggie. She wears skirts, after all, and is called "Mrs Popeye" by the landlady's daughter, Fanny Clegg, because — or so it seems — the woman has a sailor for her husband.

As critics have observed, Maggie is not, in the strict biological sense, a woman, but a transvestite. The evidence for this is unmistakable from only one piece of evidence near the very end of the story (237), when, quarrelling with her "husband," Maggie says, "I'm sick of wearing these glad rags round my legs." Before then there is not — or at least not to this critic — any hard evidence except what pretty well turns out to be such on a second reading, most significantly two things: (a) the fact that when Bill and Maggie nearly embark on having sex together, "so help me if she wasn't that flat-chested I couldn't even feel anything" (196); and (b) when, after his imprisonment as a result of Maggie's complaint on account of his having "interfered" with her, Bill returns to Mrs Clegg's place to find, in Maggie's room, "an old man lying on the bed with only his shirt on" (219). However, although all this settles the matter beyond any doubt (and there are further slighter hints), the reader may be forgiven if until Bill attempts to add "two and two together," he has not realized that "Maggie" is not what "she" seems.

But if Bill does this, and later looks for some "decent sheilas" when Terry dies, perhaps the reader should search *his* mind for a connection between his discovery of the significance of Maggie's not wanting to wear skirts and of Bill's seemingly superficial need for a straight-out heterosexual relationship. What connection could there be? I suggest that it is that Bill wants to get away from what he is coming to see as "*indecent sheilas*." If that is so, the irony of "decent sheilas" goes beyond what I have previously suggested: Bill wants to forget about homosexual relations.

But, if he feels this while Terry is dying, is it not somewhat peculiar that he should be thinking — again, *seemingly* — of the newly revealed fact that *Maggie* is a homosexual? Surely there must be a link with Terry, somehow?

I suggest that indeed there is, and that the *indecent sheilas* which Bill by implication has in mind are not merely Maggie and "Mr Popeye," but also Terry himself. It is a sign of Sargeson's mastery of his craft that this possibility only very, very slowly dawns upon one after the story. Of course the fact *had* to be kept in the background, for otherwise it would have been impossible for Sargeson to present the Bill-Terry relationship as the pure one which notwithstanding our subsequent reali-

zation it continues to be in our minds.

Bill himself is essentially a highly orthodox young man who views sex as an animalistic passion for the other sex, for what — in that irritating Australasian idiom which Sargeson does not dissociate himself from — are persistently called “sheilas.” The story starts off with Bill showing some interest in finding sheilas, and that is where it ends. To get the basic pattern of significance clear at this point: Bill starts off innocently; he “learns” throughout the story although he persists to be innocent in his conscious mind; at the end, although getting experienced mentally, he returns physically to innocence because he has retained sufficient purity of outlook not to be drawn into homosexuality. I am not suggesting that he does not lower himself, in Sargeson’s eyes, by turning to the sheilas, but he would have lowered himself even further — from the author’s puritanical view — if he had not clearly opted for this away from people like Maggie.

However, to come to this realization, we need to look further into Terry’s exact role. Winston Rhodes *may* be right in crediting Bill “with an intelligence level scarcely superior to that of a boy of twelve” (79), but that does not mean that we need follow Bill down to his level — or Winston Rhodes, who asserts, with reference to Terry, that “the reader can know only as much as Bill knows about him” (86). Perhaps Bill does have some difficulty in “putting two and two together,” but maybe even he manages fairly well in the end, and we, at least, should not restrict ourselves to the limited vision of a first-person narrator; to do so would be altogether to mistake the nature of fiction of this kind.

Winston Rhodes thinks that it is due to “his knowledge of the world and its ways” that Terry “has easily recognized that Maggie is no woman” (87). But, granting even that Terry does have better knowledge of the world than Bill, why is it that *only* he appears to know (apart from “Mr Popeye”) that Maggie is a man? I suggest that Terry has rather better knowledge of *Maggie*, at any rate, than the merely vague, intuitive one that Winston Rhodes allows him. There can be no doubt that Terry does know that Maggie is not a woman; it is as a result of that knowledge that Terry could threaten to “put me [Maggie] away” (235) if Maggie did not drop her case against Bill.

Terry saves Bill on the basis of what he clearly knows to be hard fact. I am not suggesting that we are to infer sexual relations between Maggie and Terry, but I do think we must postulate that they have definite knowledge of each other’s homosexuality. There are too many hints in this direction to make it possible to ignore them on a second reading. After being released from prison, Bill meets Maggie:

All right Maggie, I said, let’s forget it. You put things right again anyhow.

But I had to, she said. Terry said he’d put me away if I didn’t.

I’d forgot about Terry, she said.

I don’t get you Maggie, I said.

Yes you do, she said. You can’t tell me you don’t know.

Skip it Maggie, I said.

Of course you know, she said.

Cut it out Maggie, I said, and I was feeling pretty annoyed.

All right, she said, but you can’t kid me.

Well, I didn’t know what she was driving at ... (235)

What Maggie is “driving at” and has “forgot about Terry” is no doubt that he, too, is a homosexual. In her reading of events, it is because of Terry’s homosexual feelings for Bill that Terry saves Bill; otherwise, she implies, she might with little consequence have “forgot about Terry.” Her insistence that surely Bill *knows* must rest on what is, or what she very strongly feels to be, her knowledge of Terry’s actual physical behaviour. It is typical of her to project her own physical inclinations on Bill, too, whose innocence is significantly protected by Terry. For, after her remark about the “glad rags round my legs” when quarreling with Bert, we immediately read:

You shut up Maggie, Terry said, and he spoke mighty sharp. (238)

Maggie is wrong about Terry’s motives for shielding Bill in that Terry’s very intention is to save Bill from the depraved kind of homosexuality which Maggie is engaged in. As readers, we, too, can see the evil results of that for Bill when he ends up in prison. However, despite Terry’s outstanding moral refinement in this, we need not believe — would, indeed, be as innocently naive as Bill if we did believe — that Terry is not himself a practising homosexual. After all, it is as a consequence of the remark about the “glad rags” that Bill all of a sudden “was a wake-up so far as Maggie was concerned,” (238) and tries “to put two and two together.” It is hardly likely that all he can think of, in his new knowledge, is *one* homosexual relationship — that between Maggie and Bert. And in fact it is only on the supposition that Terry is a conscious, active homosexual that we can, I think, successfully explain his temporary absence from Bill in the presence of Reg, the man who wins a hundred pounds at the races.

In all important respects, Terry is fully loyal to Bill, and *vice versa*. This is not to say, however, that they have no sexual feelings for others. Indeed, it is a measure of the lowness of sexuality, in Sargeson’s view, that such feelings hardly matter except insofar as they may do serious practical damage to what otherwise remains an ideal relationship. It is as a result of Terry’s joining up with Reg that Bill almost has sexual intercourse with Maggie, and thus ends up in jail. Exactly what happens between Terry and Reg is something Sargeson is possibly too vague about, but I think we can nevertheless guess what he wants us to conclude. Bill himself offers two possible reasons: (a) “Terry’s after that boy’s dough”;

and (b) the reason implied, for us, through Bill's jealousy:

... maybe I was only feeling sore because I was jealous of this Reg. Because I'd thought Terry was the sort of joker who'd go solid with a cobbler, and quite apart from the money business I didn't like the way he cottoned on to Reg. (194)

In other words, although he does not realize it himself, Bill fears Reg as a sexual rival. It is a sign of Sargeson's mastery that any such notion in Bill's mind is subconscious; he strikes a wonderful balance between the overtly sexual and the merely Platonic, presenting with great freshness the experience of awakening adolescent romantic love. Still, for the reader — as distinct from Bill — the question does become: is Terry after Reg's money, or his body, or both?

There is no sign in what follows that Terry has gained financially from the encounter; even if he has, that circumstance is obviously to be seen as insignificant. Presumably, the main appeal that Reg has for Terry is not financial, and derives rather from his interest in horses, with which Terry is persistently fascinated. Still, the implication is rather strong that Bill's jealousy is not totally fanciful; for Terry does stay away from the boarding house, and is just as reluctant to talk about Reg when he returns as he elsewhere is for Bill to know the facts about Maggie. I take it that Sargeson is presenting Terry as having sexual needs which can only be fulfilled *outside* his relationship with Bill, since it is mandatory — if that relationship is to remain ideal — for it to remain free from sex.

What we have, then, is a love story between a young adolescent boy who is essentially heterosexual, as Terry knows from his reaction to the supposed female Maggie (cf. e.g. 185, "I told Terry I wouldn't mind trying her out..."), and an older man who is essentially a homosexual but who shields his young friend from that knowledge. There is no indication, in fact, of Terry entertaining any truly *sexual* feeling for Bill, and the story gains in strength from such feeling rather being the other way round; Sargeson is an expert at preventing us from developing any stock responses. However, at the end of the story we might just possibly feel that the author's puritanism is getting the better of him when he so obviously lets Terry die because the relationship cannot be sustained now that Bill *has* 'put two and two together'; and there appears to be a measure of mental violence in the rejection of homosexuality of any kind in favour of a less demanding approach to "decent sheilas."

However, we are now in a better position to see just what views on sex the author is offering us throughout the story, and we shall observe its eminent coherence by looking at some of the key events chronologically.

The story starts off with Bill working at a farm which he leaves,

principally, because the couple he is employed by are "fighting every night when they'd gone to bed" (157). As will become obvious later on, the point is not, or not simply, that the relationship inevitably fails because it is not between men. Certainly heterosexual relations *may* be a threat to "mateship" — that is, in Sargeson's vision, Romantic love between partners — but the same is true of homosexual relations, and therefore we shall conclude that it is *sex* which is objected to rather than man-woman relations as such. Indeed, the brief farewell between Bill and the farmer's wife serves to demonstrate right away that *Romantic* relations between members of opposite sex is a possibility. She gives him a sovereign which he is "not to spend so as I'd always remember her" (157): what is emphasized is the merit of a relationship which is characterized by loyalty, and not cheapened by the spending of money. Obviously, too, this relationship is hardly a sexual one, even though Bill receives a parting kiss. (Which may suggest that it *is* sexual hunger which spoiled the marriage of the farming couple — cf. "she grabbed hold of me for a kiss.")

When Bill finds a boarding house in Auckland, the couple managing it is hardly different from the people he has known in the country: "I could hear the pair of them going it hammer and tongs ... It was too much like what I'd been used to" (160). Since obviously the farming couple's situation was representative rather than unique, we find confirmation that Sargeson sees the inevitability of sex in a marriage as what damages it.

What Bill, unknowingly, is questing for, with his "itchy feet" (158 etc.) is a relationship more satisfying. A merely sexual relationship with a "sheila" in the "flicks" (162) comes to nothing, although the girl is certainly "willing." The reason for the failure is the presence of a young man whose sheila had let him down; Bill feels a divided impulse towards both his own sheila and his temporary mate. I think we may infer that he is to become aware that what deep down he requires is a *non*-sexual relationship, and with a man. As for the latter point: even at this early stage the feelings of his deserted male friend are more important than the "willing" sheila. Significantly, too, it appears to be the heterosexual activity between his next mate Ted and Ted's Mavis which is the chief reason for Ted's deserting him after taking his purse (it is Mavis who is obsessed with money).

So, even though Bill may not know, we, as readers, can with increasing accuracy determine what his true need is. That need is explicitly defined, when already Bill has embarked on his friendship with Terry, by a "joker" who knows at first hand the pain of betrayal and man's essential longing for "a mate that won't let him down" (182).

However, Sargeson soon shows unambiguously that the ideal relationship is not to be thought of in sexual terms. Bill and Terry are forced

to spend the night together, but "Terry didn't waste any time going right off to sleep" (183). It is Maggie who first hints in the direction of a homosexual relationship, but "Terry hit her whack over the head with the paper" (185). Maggie's coarseness is thrown into even greater relief by the fact that Terry is dying of consumption, and thus evokes poignant tenderness in Bill; Terry's sickness possibly explains why his feelings, too, are generally hardly sexual except, one surmises, when meeting Reg. The baseness of sex, as the author clearly sees it, is further emphasized through characters somewhat resembling Maggie in voracity when Bill works in a restaurant for a while: a girl "began pinching me on the backside every chance she got" and "the cook got my goat when he started trying to do the same thing" (189). One of the excellent things Sargeson seems to me to imply in this is that sexual vulgarity is not confined to males, while yet on the other hand we must avoid the opposite extreme of thinking that it does not occur in males, or that it should be translated away from heterosexuality into homosexuality in the mistaken supposition that it will then get refined. One may, however, regret that obviously the author's view allows only for a tragic split between either sexual or Romantic relations. By the very nature of things, Sargeson's idea of "mateship" no matter the sex of the partners can never be a truly fulfilled one because he will not permit sexuality into the relationship. It is not that Sargeson can have no sympathy at all for a character like the cook, who touchingly buys Bill a bunch of flowers; but the cook is decidedly of a sensibility inferior to what the Platonic lovers can experience:

... Terry and me were out for the day, and you know the feeling. Terry looked good and didn't cough much, he was funny the way he piped off people he saw in the crowd, and I could have grabbed him round the waist and chucked him up in the air, I was that full of beans I was sort of feeling that way. (190)

The greatest menace to this Romantic happiness, is, it appears, the gross sensuality of Maggie and Bert of which Bill would have become the desperate victim if it were not for Terry's loyalty. The Maggie-Bert relationship demonstrates more than any other evidence that Sargeson is not simply attacking heterosexual relations. In fact, he shows us the beneficial effect of the Romantic Bill-Terry relationship even on Maggie by presenting Maggie as "sort of serious" (196) before taking Bill up into her room. It is, however, apparently inevitable that in the end the process is rather the other way round: through Maggie, Bill learns to "put two and two together" and significantly Terry then dies.

True "mateship" as shown by Sargeson is therefore a Romantic notion. It is characterized by innocent spontaneousness which cannot

last once awareness of our fallen nature is allowed into it. Inevitably, however loyal the partners and however successful at holding out against the world's harshness, the relationship is doomed to be destroyed by the fact that in the end man cannot maintain his innocence. Bill may well develop another strong relationship with a mate, but, now that his consciousness is no longer that of an adolescent, it is not likely to match the intensity and purity of "*that summer*." However, returning to the kind of "decent sheilas" which he was initially interested in, Bill may also again expect to enter into a firm bond with a male mate. He will presumably fare better now that he has learned to keep any sexual feeling apart from mateship — to accept, in other words, that love and sex are not compatible, and that the latter should be reserved for women only. If that is actually Sargeson's vision of what in the end the matter is like, we may prefer the kind of predominantly Platonic but unconsciously sexual adolescent love which for the most part the story appears to celebrate. True, such love as Bill's may not last, but while it does — homosexual or not — it seems to point at a greater, more complete, range of possibilities for man than Sargeson finally appears to grant him. Sargeson's division between love and sex seems to me curiously unhealthy, and may in fact be less "realistic" than the set of feelings which Bill and his creator seem to reject in such an utterance as the final "Maybe if only it had rained, I remember I thought." However, perhaps there is ambiguity in this, and the more Romantic reader can console himself with the fact that until Bill rushes off to get the priest for the dying Terry the full loss of "*that summer*" overwhelmingly comes through in the language — most potently, perhaps, in everything that is implied but emphatically *not* stated in the haunting repetitions of "Terry I'd say ... And then I'd say, Terry, I said ... Terry, I said." (238-9)

It is in such passages, not in the supposedly realistic vulgarity about "decent sheilas" that Sargeson rises to his true stature as one of New Zealand's greatest Romantic writers.